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ABSTRACT

The principal objective of the study presented here was to assess the role conflict resolution mode selected by administrators when they are faced with conflict situations. The modes investigated included those of independent action, variations of conformity, compromise, and withdrawal with consideration of legitimacy and sanction factors. The importance of issue specificity and hierarchical relationships was also investigated. All 376 Kansas high school principals were surveyed using a specially designed and tested 5-part questionnaire covering six distinct conflict situations. Data obtained from the 288 respondents were subjected to chi square, gamma test, and cross-tabulation analyses. The study results suggest that principals be typed as either compromisers or independent actors in efforts to resolve conflict. The findings relative to issue specificity and hierarchical position prompted the development of a reconceptualized role conflict resolution model. (Author)

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ROLE CONFLICT RESOLUTION BEHAVIOR OF KANSAS PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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A Paper Prepared for Presentation at the
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ABSTRACT

"Role Conflict Resolution Behavior of
Kansas Public High School Principals"

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The principal objective of the present study was to assess the role conflict resolution mode which administrators select when faced with conflict situations. Modes investigated included independent action, variations of conformity, compromise, and withdrawal with consideration of legitimacy and sanction factors. The importance of issue specificity and hierarchical relationships was also investigated. All 376 Kansas high school principals were surveyed using a specially designed and tested five-part questionnaire covering six distinct conflict situations. Data obtained from the 288 respondents were subjected to chi square, gamma test, and cross-tabulation analyses. Results suggested typing principals as either compromisers or independent actors in efforts to resolve conflict. Findings relative to issue specificity and hierarchical position prompted development of a reconceptualized role conflict resolution model.

ROLE CONFLICT RESOLUTION BEHAVIOR OF KANSAS PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

If there is a single pervasive characteristic of modern society, it is that it is a society of organizations. Granted, there are multiple types of organizations, both formal and informal. For example, there are industrial, governmental, educational, civic, and religious organizations. However, each has one thing in common which concurrently provides the organization its greatest asset and greatest liability; each is comprised of human beings who demonstrate considerable variability.

Internal and external circumstances frequently put the human members of the organization in direct conflict with one another. These conflicts often arise out of the issues facing the role set of which the individual is a member and are confounded by the expectations held by others of the particular role incumbent. Therefore, the individual is faced with role conflict. Relative to this human and organizational phenomenon, at least two questions arise worthy of investigation. How do individuals seek to resolve role conflict, i.e., what resolution-oriented decisions do they make? Also, what explanatory reasons can be ascribed to specific role conflict resolution decisions and do these differ depending on the role actors, organizational level, and specific nature of the conflict issue?

The study described herein focused on the above questions as they pertain to public high school principals. The public school hierarchy of related positions is one formal organization wherein role conflict situations arise among school administrators, their superiors and subordinates. In one sense, the present study was conducted to contribute to theory building and refinement in order to enhance description, explanation, and prediction of role

conflict resolution behavior. The ability to assess reactions to an existing conflict situation, to understand exhibited behavior, and to predict the reaction of key administrative personnel to future situations should aid persons in the formal school organization in resolving serious conflict situations or in more adequately adjusting them into the mainstream of behavioral relations.

Theoretical Framework

When the school is considered as a social system, administrative behavior may be clarified by application of general models of administrative theory and practice. Social role theory, role conflict theory, and role conflict resolution theory emerge as useful conceptual tools for describing, explaining, and predicting administrative behavior. Moreover, role conflict and its operational behavior counterpart, role conflict resolution, serve as powerful concepts derived from broader social system macro concepts for the study of administrative behavior.

Major studies dealing with role conflict theory may be attributed to Merton (1957) and Getzels and Guba (1955). Landmark investigations of role conflict resolution behavior include Parsons and Shils (1951), Stouffer (1951, 1962), Toby (1953), Gross, et al. (1958a, 1958b), and Ritzer and Trice (1969). In addition to the studies by Gross and his colleagues, Sayan and Charters (1970) specifically investigated role conflict and role conflict resolution as the concepts apply to public school educators.

The underlying conceptual base for the present study was the role conflict resolution theory as empirically established by Gross, Mason, and McEachern (1958b) and as modified by Ritzer and Trice (1969). Figure 1

illustrates the role conflict resolution theory in model form. The model indicates that persons who perceive all expectations of their performance as legitimate will be predisposed to conform to those expectations because they feel that they have a moral obligation to do so. They also view those expectations as morally important, or right and reasonable. Persons who perceive expectations as nonlegitimate are conversely predisposed not to conform to them; however, due to the perceived sanctions which may be placed upon them for not conforming, they conform because it is the expedient thing to do. The role actor will react to the conflict situation in terms of his personal orientation to the legitimacy and sanctions inherent to a particular situation involving his role set. Because the role actor may react on the basis of decisions concerning both legitimacy and sanctions in each conflict situation, he is said to be a moral-expedient actor. This composite orientation to problem solving behavior leads the role actor to five possible actions as depicted in the model.

Figure 1 about here

Gross, et al. (1958b) originally identified four modes of role conflict resolution behavior. Assuming that a role actor may have at least two different conflicting expectations confronting him, he could (a) conform to the first expectation, Conform A, (b) conform to the second expectation, Conform B, (c) try to compromise between the two expectations, or (d) withdraw from any decision making whatsoever. However, Ritzer and Trice (1969), in a study of personnel managers, found empirical evidence suggesting that a fifth resolution behavior mode should be added to the model. This mode, as presented

in the Figure 1 model, is labeled independent action, indicating that the role actor does not conform to either set of expectations, does not either compromise or withdraw, but rather makes his own decision or set of recommendations. Other aspects of the Gross, et al. study were supported by the investigation by Ritzer and Trice, both in conceptual and methodological features.

While the variables depicted in Figure 1 provided the conceptual clues for the present investigation, efforts were made to look at the role conflict resolution model in an expansionary manner. Specifically, the researchers were concerned with the influence of the position of the conflict within the organizational hierarchy (i.e., conflicts involving superiors, peers, and subordinates) and the influence of conflict issue specificity.

For purposes of the present study, the assumption was made that school administrators are familiar with their own organization and with common conflict situations which may directly affect their positions within the organization. It was further assumed that administrators have had prior experience in attempting to resolve role conflicts, i.e., they are not totally naive or inexperienced role actors. The investigation, therefore, utilized the general role conflict resolution model and presented to selected subjects three hierarchical level conflict situations (superior, peer, and subordinate) with which administrators are concerned. Within these levels, six issues were presented in "story" form depicting issue specificity for matters in which the high school principal likely would have experience or eventually would assume an active role. Therefore, the conflict situations presented provided a basis whereby administrators could realistically identify with the issue, its hierarchical position, and possible courses of resolution behavior.

Hypotheses

Drawing from role conflict resolution theory while taking into account organizational level and issue specificity as possible intervening variables, the following hypotheses were proposed for the present study:

HI There will be no significant differences in the type of role conflict resolution selected by high school principals in each of the following role conflict situations (tested by chi square analysis, .05 level):

HI.1 Superior/subordinate (school board/principal) conflict situations involving issues related to "efficiency expert's recommended changes in work load" and "budgetary referendum recommendations."

HI.2 Middle management/peer (principal/principal) conflict situations involving issues related to "sex education curriculum" and "minority group representation."

HI.3 Middle management/subordinate (principal/teachers) conflict situations involving issues related to "dress code" and "ability grouping."

HII There will be no significant differences in the coded reason responses given by high school principals and the types of role conflict resolution selected for each of the role conflict issues (tested by chi square analysis, .05 level).

HIII There will be no significant degree of association between the legitimacy scores and the frequency of resolution responses across all conflict issues selected by high school principals for each type of resolution response (tested by gamma, .05 level).

HIV There will be no significant degree of association between the sanction scores and the frequency of resolution responses across all conflict issues selected by high school principals for each type of resolution response (tested by gamma, .05 level).

Method

Instrumentation

A pilot study survey questionnaire was designed which included conflict situations similar to those in the earlier superintendents' study (Gross, et

al., 1958b) plus modifications and situations based on existing theory, such as the Ritzer and Trice (1969) fifth resolution mode and the Miller and Shull (1962) sanction response types. The pilot instrument, while similar in form to previously used forms, was structured to combine the strongest modifications from previous studies providing more functional assessment of role conflict resolution behavior.

The pilot questionnaire included a background section for collecting demographic data and ten conflict issues across three organizational hierarchy levels. Five distinct parts were evident for each issue: (a) the story-form description of the conflict issue; (b) five resolution response possibilities which could discretely be labeled as Conform A, Conform B, Compromise, Withdraw, or Independent Action; (c) open-ended reason responses for resolution selected; (d) legitimacy response, Likert-scaled to assess the perceived appropriateness of expectations of significant others in the conflict episode; and (e) sanction response, scaled in ascending order relative to negative sanctions the focal person would be willing to endure as a consequence of his decision.

The instrument was administered to a pilot sample of fifty graduate students of educational administration, a majority of whom had prior administrative experience. Analysis of pilot study data resulted in collapsing the ten original issues to the six as reflected in the research hypotheses. In addition, feedback from the pilot sample and from a panel of evaluators resulted in several minor word changes to make instructions clearer and to resolve some problems of construct ambiguity.

Finally, the pilot study resulted in a meaningful categorization of the open-ended reason responses for resolution selection. Reasons which described

a respondent's desire to maintain decision participation by all involved were coded Participation Maintenance. Reasons indicating obligations to agree, abide by, satisfy, or carry-out the wishes of particular secondary groups were coded Universalism. Willingness to consider, protect, or empathize with primary groups was coded Particularism. Reasons designating desires to act on the basis of individual professional judgment and personal professional input were coded Professional Initiative. Groups of reason responses suggesting needs to minimize negative sanctions concerning job, position, power, or management control were coded Security. Reasons given signifying no further obligation to support previous resolution choices were coded Non-elaboration. Five independent judges were asked to read and categorize a random sample of reason responses for three selected issues using the above labels. Kendall's W (Siegel, 1956) was used to determine an index of overall agreement among the independent judges. Resulting values of Kendall's coefficient of concordance were .68, .70, and .85 for the three sets of issue responses, all significant at the .05 level. The reason response codes, therefore, were maintained for analysis of field survey returns.

Sampling and Data Collection

The revised instrument was mailed to the study population of 376 (100%) Kansas public high school principals employed during the 1972-73 school year. From the total population, 288 or 77% responded to either the initial mailing or one of the two follow-up mailings. The total number of school districts represented by respondents was 286 which is 92% of the 311 Kansas school districts. Respondents adequately represented all geographical areas of the state, varying sized school districts, and multiple combinations of demographic

characteristics. These factors, coupled with a cursory comparative analysis of early respondents and late respondents, suggested that no particular population factors were either over-represented or under-represented by the sample.

Data Analysis

A data processing card was prepared for each survey respondent containing the following information: (a) demographic data; (b) role conflict resolution modes, by organizational level and specific to the six issues; (c) coded reason responses, by specific issue; (d) legitimacy scores, by specific issue; and (e) sanction scores, by specific issue.

Chi square analysis was used to test for significant differences (Hypotheses I and II). Scores for the legitimacy and sanction measures were compared with resolution responses using the gamma measure of association (Champion, 1970; Rogers, 1968). Legitimacy scores were treated as independent variables while modes of resolution for the various issues were treated as independent variables (Hypothesis III). For Hypothesis IV, sanction scores as independent variables were compared with resolution modes for the issues as dependent variables. In addition, cross tabulations of certain demographic data with resolution modes, reason responses, and legitimacy and sanction scores were completed to further analyze respondent patterns.

Results

The frequency distribution of behavioral choices, representing modes or types of role conflict resolution, is presented in Table 1 for each of the six conflict issues: (a) efficiency expert report, (b) budget referendum, (c) sex education, (d) minority representation, (e) dress code, and (f) ability

grouping. Tabulated data reveal that the compromise conflict resolution mode was selected most often by the respondent for five of the six conflict issues. A higher incidence of respondents choosing the independent action mode is noted for the minority representation problem, issue four.

Table 1 about here

Reasons given by the principals for selecting their resolution modes are also presented in Table 1, by frequency distribution across the six issues using the adopted reason response coding scheme. More principals indicated that they reacted to conflict issues on the basis of professional initiative across the six issues than for other behavioral reasons. However, the most frequent reason response for issue one was participation maintenance and the most frequent for issue five was particularism.

Table 2 presents the distribution of legitimacy scores and of sanction scores across the six issues. The distribution of legitimacy scores is best described by considering the issues within the hierarchical levels represented by situational sets of issues. Issues one and two involved the principal and his superiors as a role set; issues three and four pertained to the principal and his peers; and the last two issues involved the principal and his teachers. Scores on the legitimacy measure indicate the extent to which respondents feel that the expectations of significant others are legitimate, right and reasonable. Lower scores indicate that respondents felt expectations were legitimate while higher scores indicate perceived illegitimate expectations. As Table 2 reveals, responses tended to aggregate around the middle scale score. However, scores were essentially skewed in favor of the higher end of the

scale for all issues except one and two, suggesting that principal respondents do not perceive the expectations of their peers and subordinates as legitimate as they do those of their superiors.

Table 2 about here

Sanction scores, as presented in Table 2, were more evenly distributed across all issues and hierarchical levels than legitimacy scores. Scores on the sanction measure indicate the extent to which respondents are willing to endure sanctions from significant others. Lower scores (1-2) indicate respondent unwillingness, while higher scores (4-5) indicate respondent willingness to endure strong negative sanctions by others. As in the case of legitimacy scores, the sanction score distribution reveals a tendency to cluster around the middle scale score, with 487 scores higher than 3 and 514 scores lower than 3. Because approximately 75% of the sanction scores were 3 or above, consistent across all issues and hierarchical levels, respondents provided evidence that they are willing to endure relatively strong negative sanctions from significant others before changing their minds in relation to actions specified by the resolution mode selected for each conflict issue.

Hypotheses

The first hypothesis, with three sub-hypotheses, was developed to test for differences in role conflict resolution modes within three hierarchical levels of the public school organization. The result of chi square analysis for the modes of resolution in issues one and two (attained $X^2 = 10.7$) indicate that within the first hierarchical level, superior/middle-management,

no significant differences ($X^2 = 21.0$, $p < .05$, df=12) existed in the type of role conflict resolution selected by high school principals. Therefore, hypothesis HI.1 was retained. Likewise, hypothesis HI.2 was retained when chi square analysis for the modes of resolution in issues three and four (attained $X^2 = 24.4$) indicated no significant differences ($X^2 = 26.3$, $p < .05$, df=16) within the peer group hierarchical level, middle management/middle management. However, the chi square analysis for issues five and six (attained $X^2 = 36.8$) within the third hierarchical level, that being middle management/subordinate, revealed significant differences ($X^2 = 26.3$, $p < .05$, df=16) in modes of resolution selected by the principals between the conflict issues. Therefore, hypothesis HI.3 was rejected and raised the possibility that issue specificity influences conflict resolution behavior at this organizational level.

The second major hypothesis addressed possible differences between reason responses given by principals for their actions and the modes of role conflict resolution selected. All chi square values (Table 3) for the six reason response categories paired with the six resolution modes across the six issues were significant at the .05 level. The chi square values were computed with no expected cell frequencies of less than five and the Conform B and Withdrawl resolution modes were dropped prior to the chi square test on some issues in order to prevent inflated values. Because the statistical analysis indicated the existence of significant differences between coded reason responses and types of resolution action, HII was rejected. The alternative hypothesis would suggest that significant differences exist between modes of resolution and reasons for such choices. In other words, prinicipals choose particular conflict resolution actions for different reasons.

Table 3 about here

From cross tabulations of mode/reason data, it appears that the probability for expressing a particular reason response shifts from one hierarchical level to another. In general, independent actors gave professional initiative reasons when dealing with subordinates and participation maintenance reasons when dealing with peers. Compromisers gave professional initiative and participation maintenance reasons most frequently when dealing with subordinates, but reasons of professional initiative and particularism were given most frequently when the conflict issues involved peers. When facing conflicts involving superiors, both independent actors and compromisers gave particularistic reasons for their actions.

The third and fourth research hypotheses focused on the level of association between the conflict resolution modes selected by the principals and legitimacy scores and sanction scores respectively. Gamma values were determined for corresponding legitimacy scores and resolution modes in each of the six issues. Only one gamma test of association value (.16 for issue four) was significant at the .05 level. Because a relatively large N was treated, acknowledgment that the probability of one significant gamma value occuring by chance alone must be made. Since five of the six gamma values were not significant and the validity of the significant value is unassured, hypothesis HIII was retained.

Results of the gamma test of association between corresponding sanction scores and modes of resolution in each of the six issues were similar to those for legitimacy scores. Only one gamma value (-.21 for issue two) was significant

at the .05 level and is subject to the same uncertainities as expressed above. Therefore, HIV was retained. Results indicate, therefore, that there is no significant degree of association between either legitimacy scores or sanction scores and the prinicipal's selected mode of role conflict resolution.

Discussion

Results of the data analyses characterize the typical Kansas high school principal, when confronted with organizational role conflicts, as either a compromiser or independent actor who tends to give participation maintenance or professional initiative reasons for his probable conflict resolution action. The principals overall, and particularly the compromisers and independent actors, tended to question the legitimacy of peer group and subordinate expectations as significant others in the role conflict episodes. However, the opposite legitimacy perception was expressed in superior/middle management conflict situations, i.e., principals view behavioral expectations of the school board as more right and appropriate than those of either principal colleagues or teachers. Principals' willingness to endure negative sanctions as a consequence of resolution mode adopted appears to be largely dependent upon the nature of the particular issue and the hierarchical levels within which the conflict exists. The expressed willingness to endure relatively negative sanctions was greater in the case of conflicts involving other principals and teachers than in those involving the board of education.

Aside from these general observations, it appears that legitimacy and sanction as conflict resolution variables are not statistically related to modes of resolution behavior. One plausible explanation for this finding is that legitimacy and sanction concerns are not logical complements of the most often adopted resolution modes of independent action and compromise. In one

respect, the independent actor initially decides upon a plan of action and, after surveying all aspects of the situation, merely proceeds with "his" plan regardless of expectation legitimacy and sanction consequences. On the other hand, the compromiser essentially is willing to pool all his efforts and allow the effects of legitimacy and sanction potential alleged by other groups to become more or less neutralized. The compromiser's plans are to attempt to partially satisfy both groups, giving highly weighted legitimacy and sanction primacy to neither group of significant others.

The descriptive data and results of hypotheses tested, suggest a modification of the role conflict resolution model as presented earlier in Figure 1. Therefore, a reconceptualized model (Figure 2) is proposed on the basis of the following conclusions: First, it appears that the nature of the conflict issue, which provides the operational environment for role conflict, is related to particular hierarchical levels. Second, perceptions of expectation legitimacy seem to vary from level to level in the organizational hierarchy. Third, willingness to endure perceived negative sanctions from significant others is differentially related to hierarchical levels. Fourth, the decision rationale (reason responses) of role conflict resolvers provides a basis for identifying personal orientation to norms and values which demonstrate the reasons for inclinations toward expectation legitimacy and sanctions endurance. Finally, evidence suggests that role actors resolve conflict in one of five different ways based upon an approximately parsimonious network of behavioral variables. In essence then, the composite model of role conflict resolution developed from findings by Gross, et al., (1958b) and Ritzer and Trice (1969) has been expanded to include issue specificity and hierarchical level as possibly powerful intervening variables and a breakdown of the personal orientation variable into discrete categories.

Figure 2 about here

The present study also revealed needs for further instrument development for investigating role conflict resolution. Standardized structure of the instrument appears to be essential and within reach. Specific categories of reason responses should be further developed to provide a more sensitive differentiation of behavior rationale than that generally associated with open-ended responses. Additional organizational roles by level (intermediate management, lower level management, superordinate, and lateral levels) should be surveyed. A sanction scale including both positive and negative sanctions might advantageously be incorporated to further identify specific personal motivations and orientations. Finally, priority of choice analysis would add further discrimination of conflict resolution modes.

Implications

The investigation described herein suggests that, even with the wealth of studies conducted to date, further research should be conducted with several new conceptual and methodological directions. The question as to whether role conflict and role conflict resolutions modes are uniquely ordered relative to issue specificity and hierarchical position within the organization must be raised and answered in future empirical investigations. The reconceptualized role conflict resolution model and suggested instrumentation changes resulting from the present study are viewed as potential contributors to achieving a very worthwhile objective, a role conflict resolution theory which is high in descriptive, explanatory, and predictive strength.

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Table 1

Distribution of Conflict Resolution Behavioral Choices and Reason Responses for Each Conflict Issue (N = 288)

	Conflict Issue*						
Behavioral Choice	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Independent Action	88	2	98	127	100	111	526
Conform A	7	119	47	70	19	9	271
Conform B	1	6	15	13	4	34	73
Compromise	192	154	120	72	160	128	826
Withdraw	0	7	8	6	5	6	32
Reason Response	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**Total**
Participation Maintenance	8	46	39	68	93	52	306
Universalism	68	43	21	21	32	17	202
Particularism	92	29	28	57	19	53	278
Professional Iniative	63	87	105	73	69	98	495
Security	1	23	31	6	11	6	78
Non-Elaboration	2	6	10	9	1	8	36
No Response	54	54	54	54	54	54	324

*Issue: 1 - efficiency expert report on work load changes
2 - budget referendum
3 - sex education
4 - minority representation
5 - dress code
6 - ability grouping

Table 2

Distribution of Legitimacy Scores and Sanction Scores for Each Conflict Issue (N=288)

	Conflict Issue*						
Legitimacy Score**	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
1	64	20	13	28	1	5	131
2	126	47	27	29	9	17	255
3	88	216	88	91	163	175	821
4	6	4	81	67	75	71	304
5	4	1	79	73	40	20	217
Sanction Score***	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
1	19	20	18	19	20	13	109
2	102	92	50	50	50	61	405
3	100	114	121	119	136	137	727
4	18	14	64	57	28	34	215
5	49	48	35	43	54	43	272

*Issue: 1 - efficiency expert report on work load changes
2 - budget referendum
3 - sex education
4 - minority representation
5 - dress code
6 - ability grouping

**The lower the legitimacy score (e.g., 1-2), the more the respondent perceived that expectations of significant others in the conflict episode were right and reasonable.

***The lower the sanction score (e.g., 1-2), the less willing was the respondent to endure percieved possible sanctions from significant others in the conflict episode.

Table 3

Chi Square Values for Reason Responses
Paired with Resolution Modes

Issue	Chi Square (Attained)*	N	d.f.	Chi Square (for $p<.05$)
1	43.5	277	4	9.5
2	71.2	273	6	12.6
3	53.0	270	12	21.0
4	196.1	268	12	21.0
5	73.2	268	8	15.5
6	85.9	261	8	15.5

* Chi Square values computed with no cell expected frequencies less than five. All values significant at the .05 level.

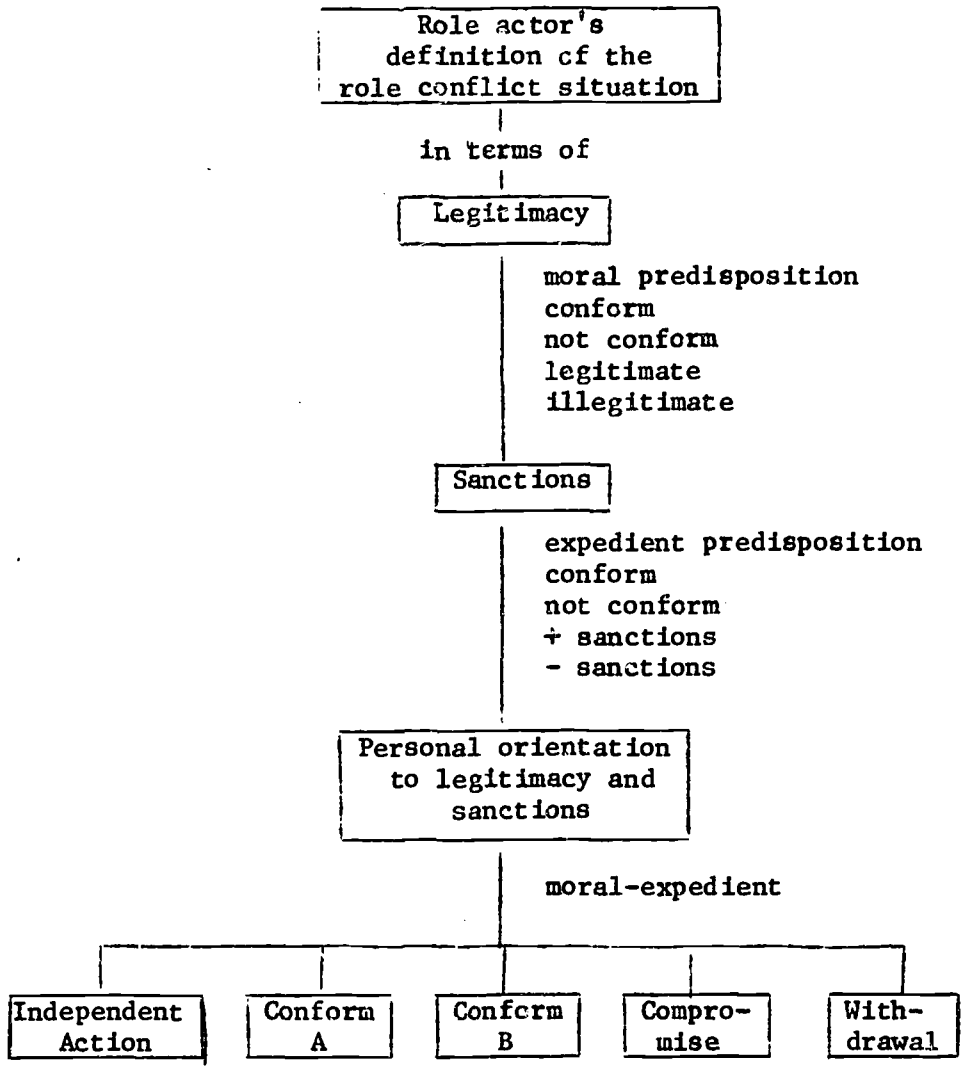

Fig. 1 Model of the Role Conflict Resolution Theory as Conceptualized by Gross, Mason and McEachern and as Expanded by Ritzer and Trice

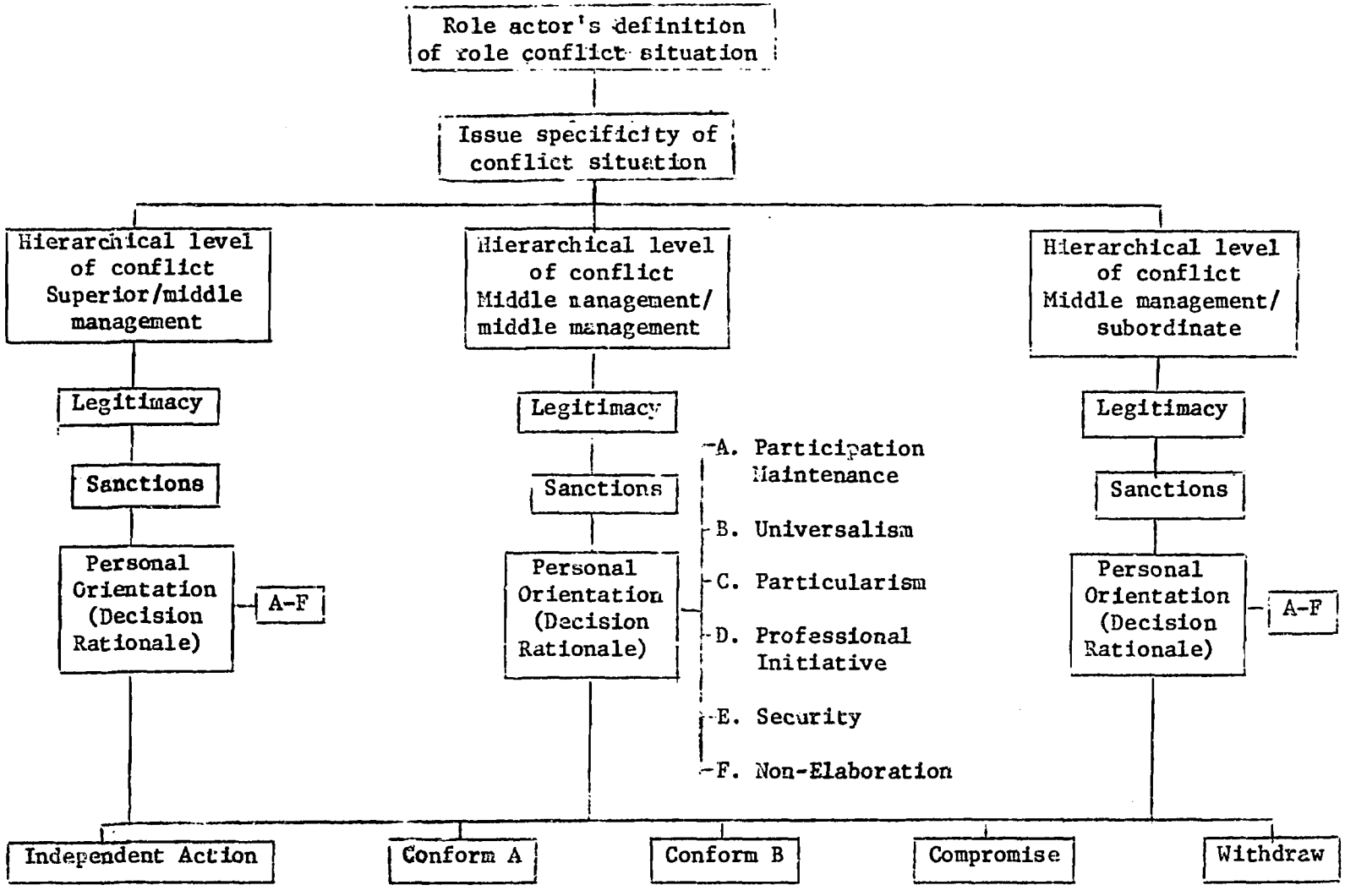

Fig. 2. Role Conflict Resolution: A Reconceptualized Model